

Local historian: 108-172

'Great place' may be at risk

State officials: Demolition of historic houses won't be deciding factor

Peter Rugg

of the Muscatine Journal

MUSCATINE, Iowa – A Muscatine historian and preservationist is concerned that the demolition of two historic properties could hurt Muscatine's chances of being named a "great place" by the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs.

Kent Sissel said community reaction to the demolition of the houses at 126 and 122-124 W. Third St. this week could negatively affect Muscatine under the Iowa Great Places selection criteria.

The houses were torn down by Muscatine Beyond 2000, a nonprofit organization aimed at improving the appearance of

Iowa Great Places

- A unique sense of place
- Provides an engaging experience
- A rich social fabric
- A vital economy
- A pleasing environment
- A strong foundation
- A creative culture

Source: Iowa Great Places Web site, www.iowagreatplaces.gov

Muscatine, attracting new businesses and developing and fostering civic pride.

The organization purchased the dilapidated properties from the city of Muscatine. The Muscatine City Council purchased the homes more than a year ago with a \$130,000 federal

grant, intending to turn the property into a parking lot for the nearby Clark House. The city's demolition plan was stopped by federal housing officials due to the buildings' historic value, and funding to renovate the properties could not be found.

As part of launching the new Iowa Great Places program, government agencies will work together as partners in pilot projects in three communities to be selected later this year. The program is intended to help stimulate ideas and planning, streamline access to available state resources, help leverage local and private resources, and share

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The Alexander Clark House, at 205-207 W. Third St., is considered one of Muscatine's historic properties. An influential journalist and diplomat, Clark was one of Muscatine's most prominent residents.
**PETER RUGG/
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technical expertise, according to Iowa Great Places officials. The end goal is to "cultivate the unique qualities that make the places special," according to Gov. Tom Vilsack.

A public forum on the program will be held at Stanley Consultants' auditorium at 5:30 p.m., Thursday, May 26. The forum is one of 10 being held across the state to raise interest and awareness of the project.

"If you look at the criteria for selection for the pilot projects, one of the important criteria is how the community responds to its history and culture," Sissel said, adding that the demolition would not reflect well on Muscatine.

Despite Sissel's concerns, Iowa Great Places coordinator Monica Fischer said that many communities throughout Iowa will not meet every specific criteria, and that one incident does not necessarily warrant concern.

"Not every place is going to meet every criteria," she said.

After the public forums are held, interested communities can apply for the program by submitting an invitation by July 1 to the Iowa Great Places team, made up of representatives from 18 state agencies. A Great Places coach will be assigned to help create a community profile and presentation to the judges. After September presentations, three pilot places will be chosen

in October.

Muscatine City Council member Jerry Lange, also a member of the Muscatine Historic Preservation Commission, said that although the demolition was regrettable, it was necessary due to a lack of funding for renovation.

"I'm sure the lot will be put to good advantage," Lange said. "And right now, I think our focus needs to be on the (remaining) homes and buildings in Muscatine that do have historic value."

Lange also said the Commission is in the process of identifying local buildings with possible historic value, and that concentration should be on properties that do not need extensive renovations.

Lange doubted the demolition would hurt Muscatine's chances of qualifying for the Great Places program.

"Muscatine will be identified as one of the great places because of all the good things that are going on," he said. "There are lots of good things happening right now, especially on the riverfront."

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